



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

**10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 18, 2019 (Prop 15, Ord 20)**

Sermon Title: "The Cloud"

**Gospel Text: Luke 12:49-56
Sermon Text: Hebrews 11:29-31, 39 – 12:2**

Today we turn our attention to the Letter to the Hebrews, which is a complex and somewhat mysterious portion of the New Testament. I say mysterious because we don't know who wrote it. There is no scholarly consensus. Likewise, scholars aren't entirely sure to whom the author of the letter was writing. The letter's commonly used name, Hebrews, is based on the assumption that it was intended for a community of Jews who had converted to Christianity. That assumption is based in part on the fact that no book of the New Testament makes greater use of the Old Testament than Hebrews in making the case for Jesus Christ.

Here's what we *do* know about the Letter to the Hebrews. It was drafted somewhere between 30 and 60 years after Christ's resurrection, and was written for a community that was going through a very difficult time. The initial glow they had experienced after joining this new movement – Christianity – had given way to a new and harsh reality that life had not magically become trouble-free just because they had become Christians. Nor had their new beliefs made them prosperous or popular. In fact, we read in the letter that they had experienced "hard struggles with sufferings," as well as abuse and persecution. Even their possessions had been plundered. We don't know who their persecutors were; presumably they were non-believers from outside of the Christian Church, but human nature being what it is, I think we can safely assume that at least some of their hardship was probably caused by people *within* the Church too.

I suppose they should have seen this coming. After all, Jesus himself stated in today's Gospel lesson that his presence and mission would bring about division and discord. Sure, he *would win* the ultimate cosmic victory over sin, death, and the devil. But that victory would be secured with his own blood, sweat, and suffering, and until Evil gasped its last breath, *all* of Christ's followers would have to acknowledge not just the possibility but the likelihood of worldly suffering as well.

But in the immediate afterglow of conversion, suffering and conflict was probably the last thing they expected. And so now, in the harsh light of experience, this band of believers was struggling. God seemed distant. They were losing heart. Courage was diminishing. Resolve was eroding. Hope was evaporating. Faith was waning.

We can identify with their experience, can't we? Do you remember when you first became a believer in Christ? Did you experience the rosy glow of conversion, only to find out that life remains a challenge? Did you have a mountaintop experience at a national youth

gathering, a baptism, or some other significant moment of faith only to later realize, just like the community in Hebrews, that mountaintops are surrounded by valleys, and that being a Christian doesn't inoculate us against suffering, struggle, and the usual ups and downs of life?

Few if any of us have experienced *physical* persecution because of our beliefs, but living a Christian life *can* separate us from those who take a different path. Division happens. Feelings can get hurt. Worst of all, the struggle isn't just with the outside world. Stick around a congregation long enough and eventually someone will say something unkind or thoughtless. We are here not because we are perfect but because we know just how very broken we are and how desperately we *all* need Jesus. And in that brokenness, sometimes we hurt each other. That, added to all of life's other struggles, can make God seem distant. We lose heart. Courage diminishes. Resolve erodes. Hope evaporates. Faith wanes.

In response to the despair and disconnection the Christian community was feeling nearly 2,000 years ago, and in answer to the despair and disconnection we sometimes experience even today, the author of the letter to the Hebrews offers wise counsel. **First, he calls us to remember our history.** God's people have always faced daunting challenges. Moses and his people were hunted by Pharaoh's army. Joshua and his troops faced the seemingly unconquerable fortress of Jericho. And Rahab the prostitute, who seemed as estranged from God as one could be, was entrusted with an assignment on which the fate of all Israel depended. By God's grace, they prevailed. They were heroes of the faith. But it wasn't easy for them, and it won't always be easy for *us*.

Here at Grace, still among us are a few of the people from nearly 60 years ago who made the difficult but brave decision to move the church here and to build in this non-traditional style. Gaining support for the move and this design was hard. Feelings were bruised, tempers flared, and some families even left the congregation. It was also an expensive undertaking. Folks had to dig deep to pay for it. *But God was with the people of Grace Lutheran Church.* The design proved to be timeless and even iconic, and this location was truly inspired. We have grown and prospered because of our heroes of the faith. But it wasn't easy.

Even more of you were around a few years ago when the decision was made that we had to expand our building even further. A new entrance, the Miller Center, more parking, and more preschool classrooms were desperately needed. The campaign was difficult. The construction was tedious. The price tag was steep. Once again, it was a faithful and brave decision. But it wasn't easy, and we still struggle under the weight of that debt. Thanks be to God, it's shrinking, and heroes old and new are going to help us to retire it once and for all in the next two years.

Similarly, I'm sure we can all think of people in this congregation who have inspired us through their faith as they have bravely faced adversity, health crises, and difficult situations. Friends, in the history of God's church and in the history of Grace Lutheran, we are indeed surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" who inspire us and point the way forward for us. Have God's people throughout history made mistakes? Certainly. God's people here at Grace – pastors and parishioners alike – are far from perfect too. Yet somehow God keeps working in, with, and through us.

But what do we do when someone hurts us? When the struggles of life seem insurmountable and God seem distant, when we lose heart, when our courage diminishes, when our resolve erodes, when hope evaporates, and when faith wanes, how do we keep pressing forward? Well, the author of Hebrews gave us a **second piece of advice**. In addition to looking to that great cloud of witnesses, look to something even greater. Look “to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who... endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Keep your eyes and your heart ever-set on *Jesus*, who endured all of *that*, for the love of all of *us*. It’s that simple, but also that difficult, because the world will stop at nothing to distract and divert us.

Friends, in our journey of faith, there will be good days and bad days. We can’t allow ourselves to get too high or too low. It’s not a sprint; it is, as the author of Hebrews states, a *race of perseverance*. It’s the race of the tortoise, not the hare, a race where slow and steady wins the day. Encouraged by that great cloud of witnesses, supported by our fellow believers, and with our eyes and hearts ever-set on Jesus, we *can*, and we *will* fearlessly *press forward*, never giving up, never giving in, expecting that in this race, even if our legs give way, the Spirit herself will carry us to the finish line. And so live faithfully, confidently, joyfully, boldly, and fearlessly. Christ is with you! Amen.